

A LESSON IN PAIN
II CORINTHIANS 1:1:3-11

INTRODUCTION:

- A. Put on your thinking cap. Time to go back to school for a Lesson in Pain
- B. Not everything about reasons for pain will be covered here. Theodicy is that subject and it's a big one that is on the minds of many people:
 - Philip Yancy: *Where Is God When It Hurts* and *Disappointment with God*
 - James Dobson: *When God Doesn't Make Sense*

I. GOD WANTS US TO COMFORT OTHERS

- A. We Have to Have Pain
 1. Bertie Wooster. Born with a silver spoon in his mouth. Living off the graces of wealthy Aunt Agatha. Bertie would have no empathy for someone living in painful poverty. He has never worked. He has never gone hungry. He never struggled to pay the bills. He is the idle rich.
 2. Now we don't like pain. We eliminate it ever way we can.
 - We buy industrial size jars of Advil for our family and take 4 tablets at a time.
 - I salute the makers of Excedrin, the only pill that fazes my occasional headaches.
 - A pox on the dentist who pulled one of my childhood teeth without an anesthetic. Modern dentistry is so painless I fall asleep in the chair and snore. I like that.
 3. But without pain, I will never be truly effective in helping others who go through pain. One of the classically ineffective lines comforters use with hurting people is, "I know how you feel." To which hurting people respond, "No you don't!" ...unless they know that you really have suffered like them and you really do know how they feel. For example, a parent who has all compliant children will have a hard time comforting a parent who is grieving over the destructive choices of a rebellious strong-willed child.
 4. Even Jesus had to earn His comforting credentials through attendance at Pain University. **Hebrews 4:14** *Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. 15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet was without sin. 16 Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*
 5. If pain was necessary for equipping the Savior, then it's necessary for us. At least God is consistent. He doesn't ask anything of us that He didn't ask of His Son.
 6. You know, some of us try too hard to avoid pain. If you have reasonably good health, a decent job and are lucky enough to have some pretty nice kids who don't go through a period of teenage rebellion, you can cruise through life without much pain. With good dental care, many Americans never even have a toothache anymore.
 7. Sometimes we need to go looking for pain. No, I'm not a masochist; here's what I mean.
 - Come out of the closet for Christ. You'll get some pain.
 - Volunteer to teach a Sunday School class. You'll get some pain. You'll get real frustrated with kids who could care less about your carefully prepared lesson and could care even less about God and the Bible.

- Try to disciple some people to really live for the Lord. At least one of them will bail out on you and maybe even break your heart.
- Get into a ministry of leadership. That's guaranteed to get you some really good pain. Somebody is sure to question your motives, your judgment and maybe even your intelligence.

Yep, it's still true: *No pain, no gain*. If we are going to be effective in helping other people spiritually, we have to have some pain.

B. We Have to Have Comfort

1. We don't help people just by empathizing with their pain.. We help people by leading them to the source of comfort. We help people in pain by being able to share with them the work of God in our own souls, "Let me tell you what I learned about God through my pain."

2. Here's an example of a person who has had great pain but hasn't learned anything constructive through it.

Last Sunday's New York a page called "What They Were Thinking." There is a 1983 photo of a 14-year-old Seattle street girl named Tiny and another picture of her taken this past April. At the bottom of the page they quote the 30-year-old Tiny:

When they took that earlier photograph, I was 14. They were making a documentary, 'Streetwise,' about the kids on the streets of Seattle and what we did to survive. The photo was the end of the movie. It was nominated for best documentary, so I got to go to the Academy Awards. People started recognizing me. I never had to pay for anything. It was like the rich-and-famous life. I met Willie Nelson. And I even had an agent there for a minute. I thought it was going to be my big break. I thought somebody might give me a chance to do something better with my life. But I was too attracted to streets and the money and prostituting.

In the later photo I was crying because I was extremely stressed. Now that it's so many years later, I think I just wasted my big chance. I had a chance to make it big, provide for my kids, meet people, get rich and live in a nice house. I would do anything if I could just get that chance again. My kids wouldn't be suffering and wouldn't be on welfare. I think of it almost every day. I have five kids and I am pregnant again. I get bored sitting at home all the time, so I watch television. I just want to get out of this place, to get away from the people I am around.

I still have the old photo up in my living room. When I look at it, I think about how I used to live. I wish I didn't live like that. Sometimes I remember the good part, how I met Whoopi Goldberg, before she was even famous. I wonder if she remembers me.

3. What did you hear in those words? I hear pain, regret, hopelessness, bitterness. But I hear no comfort.
4. Contrast Paul's pain statement right here in **verse 5**, *the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives*. But the statement doesn't end there. There is no flavor of bitterness or hopelessness. Paul's suffering is actually a statement of triumph...**verse 5** continues, *so also through Christ our comfort overflows*.
5. Paul knew the agony of defeat, but he also knew the thrill of victory.
- He knew how it felt to be physically beaten to the point of death.
 - He knew how it felt to be hated and slandered.
 - He knew how it felt to be abandoned by friends.
 - He knew chilling clang of a slamming prison door.
- He suffered more than most people could even imagine. But through it all he rejoiced in the love and comfort of Jesus Christ.

C. We Have to Have a Heart for Others

1. Why does God comfort us? Most people would answer that question like this: “God comforts me so I will feel better.” Well, I’m sure that’s true. God cares about His children and comforts them because they need it. The Psalms are full of the theme of the suffering of the righteous and the comfort of God to make the victim feel better. Like **Psalm 4:1**, *Answer me when I call to you, O my righteous God. Give me relief from my distress; be merciful to me and hear my prayer.* In other words, God, I hurt. Please make me feel better!
2. But that’s only part of the answer. God doesn’t comfort us just so we’ll feel relief. In fact Paul doesn’t even talk about the personal relief theme. Here’s why he says God comforts him. **Verse 4**, *[God] comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.* He says it again in **verse 6**, *it is for your comfort.*
3. So the cycle of suffering and comfort is a spiritual school. God is equipping us to help others. Remember the Mission Impossible TV show. Every episode began with a top secret tape that began with these words, *Your mission, if you care to accept it...* Every experience of Christian suffering is loaded with a mission statement. Endure the pain. Experience the comfort of God. Pass on what you have learned about the grace of God.
4. One of our families has done just that. They went through a time of suffering and felt the comfort of God firsthand. In a note of spiritual reflection to me they wrote, *We’d like to know if any family has a special need...it would be great to “pass on” a caring legacy and keep it growing.* On the front of their note card are the words of God from **Jeremiah 29:11**, *“For I know the plans I have for you,” says the Lord. “They are plans for good and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.”* God bless that family. They suffered. They found the comfort of God. Now they have a mission to help comfort others.

II. GOD WANTS US TO RUN TO HIM

A. We Can Rely on Ourselves.

1. In verse 9 are the words, *rely on ourselves*. It’s what we do best. It’s what we do instinctively. When something kicks the slats out of my life, the adrenaline rushes into the bloodstream and it’s “fight or flight” time.
 - I list options and proposed solutions on my yellow legal pad
 - I get on the phone and activate my support network of friends and professionals
 - I scheme how to get people to do what I want them to do
 - I review and reposition my financial resources
 - I lay out a plan of self-defense if I think somebody may try to blame me for the problem. The important thing, I think, is to always look good. Like the **Rocket Man**, *“It wasn’t me!”*
2. We are awfully good at fixing things, especially us guys. Some of you men have never met a problem you couldn’t solve. Self-reliance is your way of life. You’ve never known it any other way. I even had a friend once say to me, *God is OK, for people who need Him*, which, being interpreted means, *I don’t need Him. Yeah, right; you don’t need him...*
 - Until you lose your job at 57 and discover there really is a thing called age discrimination
 - Until you come home and find a note from your wife informing you that she wants a divorce. She’s even packed your bag for you and it’s sitting on the kitchen table.
 - Until you find a plastic bag with a white powder substance under your 16-year-old daughter’s mattress.
 - Until you have to admit to yourself that you really can’t stop drinking when you want to

3. King Asa in **II Chronicles 16** got a disease in his feet. **Verse 12**, *Though his disease was severe, even in his illness he did not seek help from the Lord, but only from the physicians.* Two years later he was dead.

King Ahaz in Isaiah 7 really needed help. His city of Jerusalem was surrounded by two enemy armies. God sent Isaiah to tell Ahaz that the attack would be unsuccessful. God would protect Jerusalem. Then God said to the king, "Ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights." But Ahaz said, "*I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test.*" Pious sounding words, but in reality words of refusal to trust God. Here was a king who absolutely wanted to rely on himself. To decline the help of God might look like a thing of humility, but God sees it as an unbelieving pride. Isaiah shot right back at the king: "*Will you try the patience of my God...?*" (**verse 13**)

4. So there it is: Option #1. We can rely on ourselves, just like the kings Asa and Ahaz.

B. We Can Despair

1. **Verse 8**, *We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life.*

2. Paul is probably referring to the persecution he experienced in Ephesus. The city was thrown into an uproar by the idol manufacturers who feared that widespread belief in Paul's preaching about Jesus was going to cut into their profits. They incited a riot that turned ugly fast. Acts 19 says that the crowd was so volatile that officials and friends both sent messages to Paul urging to stay out of sight. After two years of incredibly successful ministry, Paul is looking for the fastest ticket out of town. In **I Corinthians 15:32** he refers to this experience as a fight with wild beasts.

3. Philosopher **Bertrand Russell** complained, *We cry into the night and there is no reply.*

Novelist **Virginia Woolf** wrote to a friend, "*I read the book of Job last night - I don't think God comes well out of it.*" (Philip Yancey, *The Bible Jesus Read*, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1999, 51)

Philip Yancey expresses much of the despair people feel: *We are born slathered in blood and bodily fluids, amid tears and cries of pain; we die in like manner; and in between birth and death we ask, Why?* (Ibid., 46)

After the death of his wife, **C. S. Lewis** wrote in his grief journal, *Not that I am (I think) in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about Him. The conclusion I dread is not "So there's no God after all," but "So this is what God's really like. Deceive yourself no longer."*

4. So there's a second option. We can surrender to despair. Or, we can commit ourselves to option #3.

C. We Can Rely on God

1. **Verse 9**, *Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.*

2. **Seattelite Carolyn Martin** has cerebral palsy and was placed for 15 years by the state in a home for the mentally retarded. She managed to break free and get her own home, graduated from high school, spent the next 7 years earning an AA degree and then enrolled in a Lutheran college to study the Bible. There she was asked to address the students at chapel. She typed her speech at 45 minutes per page on her Canon Communicator and asked her friend to read it for her as she sat on stage left, slumped and drooling in her wheel chair. Her speech was centered on this Bible text: "*But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God but not from us.*" (summarized from Yancy, *Disappointment with God*, Zondervan, 1988, 227-8)

3. What's so great about God? What can He do that no one else can do? Why is it that it makes so much sense to rely on Him? Because He *raises the dead*. Doctors can't. Scientists can't. Government can't. Strip away the veneer of the brightest people and the most powerful institutions and they're all just clay pots. And clay pots break very easily. And like **Humpty Dumpty**, we don't go back together very easily and sometimes not at all.
4. Star Wars theology glorifies levitation and light sabres. Biblical theology glorifies the God who raises the dead. Death is the last frontier and the ultimate frontier...at least to us clay pots. But God tamed that wilderness a long time ago. If He can do that, what problem in our daily lives could ever be beyond His capacity???
5. King Amaziah. **II Chronicles 25:9**, *The Lord can give you much more than that.*
6. Getting our head straight about relying on God is a sometimes messy, confusing process. Sometimes we are a mixture of self-reliance, despair and God-reliance all swirled together. And sometimes we bounce from one extreme to the other. Like in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.
"Who are you?" said the Caterpillar...
"I - I hardly know, Sir, just at the present," Alice replied rather shyly,
"at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but since I think I have changed several times since then.
7. No matter what the problem, no matter what self-help solution we are tempted to rely on, God says, *I can give you much more than that!* So let's keep bouncing back to God-reliance, even if we have to pray like that man in the Gospel, *"Lord I believe. Help my unbelief."*

III. GOD WANTS US TO GIVE THANKS

A. Share the Problem

1. **Verse 10**, *On Him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, 11 as you help us by your prayers.*
2. One of the highlights for me about our church is our Elders meeting which are twice a month, 1st and 3rd Wednesdays, 6:00 a.m. We spend the first 30-40 minutes in a prayer meeting. We get down on our knees. We pray for important things about our church and the people of our church. But here's what's really unique: We're honest with each other. We don't have unspoken prayer requests. We're really honest about where our kids are at spiritually, and about where they're not. We're pretty honest about our own spiritual needs and what's scaring us and what's frustrating us. It's refreshing and rare to be with a group of Christian guys with whom you can feel safe to share the problem and take it to God together. I hope you're doing that in your Focus Group or Bible Study. And if it hasn't been happening, how about sticking your neck out and leading your group in being a little more honest and real about the things we need to be praying with each other about.
3. When Paul had a problem, he wanted as many Christians praying as he could get. Because prayer helps. God honors the prayer blitzes.
4. If Christians play their cards close to their vests and never tell people that they have problems, then there is little prayer and there is little power.
5. There's *a request like that in your Bulletin this morning*. They want as many Christians praying as they can get. Would you pray? *"As you help by your prayers."*

B. Share the Answer

1. This section ends with the words (in **verse 11**) *in answer to the prayers of many*.
2. Paul asked people to pray and then Paul told people what God did. A prayer request contains an implicit responsibility to tell your prayer partners what God did. Asking people to pray is asking people to work hard spiritually. It is not

just poetry when the New testament speaks of prayer as a struggle and labor. Often when people ask me to pray for them, I ask that they get back to me with an update and they often do. If we really believe that God answers prayer, we ought to expect that there will be something to report back on!

3. When you work on a project or run in a race, you want to know where the finish line is. Same thing with prayer requests. We need to tell people when God pulls us across the finish line and prayer has done its work.

C. Share the Thanks

1. You would think that the main event in prayer is getting the answer we prayed for. But Paul doesn't end on that note. To him, the main event of prayer is the glory of God. See **verse 11**, *Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted to us in answer to the prayers of many.*
2. When Jesus healed the ten lepers, the biggest deal wasn't that they felt better. The biggest deal was the outshining of the divine grace of Jesus Christ. Remember how many came back to thank Jesus? Only 1. Sometimes I pray for months for something. God answers the prayer. And I catch myself a day later, happy with the answer, but having not taken time to say "Thank you" to God. We are far more prone to ask than to thank.
3. That's even more true when we have enlisted others to pray. When we let them know, many more voices of thanks are raised to God.
4. This past July I realized that Gordon and I knew a number of fantastic things God had done in lives of people in this church because people had prayed and God answered. So we asked a short list of people to tell their stories at a LeaderNet meeting at Jim and Sharon's house. We listened for well over an hour.
 - We heard about lives spared,
 - about marriages saved from divorce,
 - about people getting saved,
 - about people repenting and turning from sin.
 I went away from that meeting with a full heart. I had tears in the corners of my eyes. I was so grateful to God for what He has done. I remember thinking, What a powerful reminder of why we started this church. And I remember thinking how sweet it felt to drive away saying, God, thank for letting me be a part of what you are doing here. God was the star of that meeting. It really feels good and it really **is** good to let God be the star!

CONCLUSION:

A. **George Matheson** wrote:

My God, I have never thanked Thee for my thorns. I have thanked Thee a thousand times for my roses, but not once for my thorns. I have been looking forward to a world where I shall get compensation for my cross: but I have never thought of my cross as itself a present glory. Teach me the glory of my cross: teach me the value of my thorn. Shew me that I have climbed to Thee by the path of pain. Shew me that my tears have made my rainbow.

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